



Somewhere,



Nowhere

Philosophy for the Uncertain

Illustrated by Meghana Pota



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Introduction

This book is a representation of the feeling of uncertainty and the discomfort of not knowing what the future holds through a series of excerpts from texts by philosophers, academics, and writers accompanied by drawings inspired by them. I sourced the writings from assigned readings in classes I took, recommendations from friends and family, as well as material I happened upon by chance. I created illustrations that explore snippets of emotions, phenomena, and experiences that I, as well as many people close to me, relate to personally.

I didn't have a clear idea of what the book would look like when I started it, but the fifteen weeks I worked on it informed a narrative that gradually started to take place. It begins with thought: I often find myself looking for answers to questions that I can never know the answer to. It progresses to boredom and a thought experiment involving a train station- what is the nature of thought and the absence of it? This is followed by anxiety or the excess of thought and paralysis when faced with the freedom of choice. Anxiety then usually leads to burnout, or the feeling of exhaustion that I get when I know that I *can* be doing so much more than I am. Nausea is next: an interesting emotion introduced in Jean-Paul Sartre's novel of the same name which gave me the idea for this project. In it, it manifests as the loss of the sensation of reality and uncertainty about one's own actions, aspirations, and sense of self. Here I came to a sort of turning point: absurdity, or an analogy to the Greek myth of Sisyphus rolling a rock up a hill. I think of this as acceptance and taking control over one's own fate

that comes after these experiences of angst and dejection. The powerful final line of the text by Camus, “One must imagine Sisyphus happy,” leads to happiness as explained in a chapter from biologist Robin Kimmerer’s beautiful and evocative book, *Braiding Sweetgrass*.

Finally, I end with excerpts from Sigmund Freud and Willa Cather describing a similar sort of contentness with oneself and feeling at peace with one’s surroundings that is described as the “oceanic feeling.” I like to think of that as a fitting conclusion to my journey both with this book and at Pratt: belonging.

I truly believe philosophy is not a strictly academic subject that one can access only through higher studies or dense readings but lives in the everyday: our conversations, the books we read, the stories we tell, and the images we make. Reading these texts have helped me understand myself and the world around me during uncertain times in my life, and I hope to have made them more accessible and enjoyable to read by curating the texts I found the most interesting as well as creating illustrations that accompany them.

Thanks for reading!

-Meghana Pota

1. Thought

Blaise Pascal, Thoughts

The greatness of man consists in thought.

A thinking reed. — Not from space must I seek my dignity, but from the ruling of my thought. I should have no more if I possessed whole worlds. By space the Universe encompasses and swallows me as an atom, by thought I encompass it.

Man is but a reed, weakest in nature, but a reed which thinks. It needs not that the whole Universe should arm to crush him. A vapour, a drop of water is enough to kill him. But were the Universe to crush him, man would still be more noble than that which has slain him, because he knows that he dies, and that the Universe has the better of him. The Universe knows nothing of this.

All our dignity therefore consists in thought. By this must we raise ourselves, not by space or duration which we cannot fill. Then let us make it our study to think well, for this is the starting-point of morals.



Man is but a reed, weakest in nature, but a reed which thinks.

Simone de Beauvoir, What is Existentialism?

I don't know how many times during my trip to America someone made this request, which was also familiar to me in France: "Can you explain what existentialism is?" And my interlocutor, undoubtedly curious about any novelty yet sparing with his time and effort, would add, "in a few words" or "in five minutes." I disappointed many amiable people and made several journalists unhappy by refusing to comply. Some doubted my intellectual capacities; others were suspicious of a doctrine that could not be summarized in one sentence. However, at the risk of disappointing once again, I must say right away that even an article is not enough to give an account of existentialism. I only intend to dissipate some misunderstandings here.

The first error consists precisely in believing that existentialism can be concentrated in one or two immediately efficient, simple expressions. It is not a martingale that guarantees winning at the game of life, nor a recipe capable of erasing the annoyances of existence. Neither is it the art of interpreting dreams, evoking spirits, or holding séances. One must not expect any of these distractions that are so agreeable in society. It is not a social phenomenon analogous to the zazou phenomenon, nor a political movement, nor a postwar fashion, even though it has social repercussions, it does include political implications, and fashion has both served and disserved it. Even less is it a predilection for scandal; the Parisian public who rushed to the first existentialist conferences in the hopes of seeing surrealist extravagances again were extremely disappointed to have to listen to a serious doctrinal lecture like a class at the Sorbonne. Existentialism is first of all a philosophy, analogous in many aspects to classical philosophies and discussed in places as austere and respectable as the French Society of Philosophy, for example.

No one would dream of demanding that the system of Kant or Hegel be dispensed in three sentences; existentialism does not lend itself to popularization any easier. A philosophical theory, like a physics or mathematical theory, is accessible only to the initiated. Indeed, it is indispensable to be familiar with the long tradition upon which it

rests if one wants to grasp both the foundations and the originality of the new doctrine. How could you show the audacity of Einstein or de Broglie to someone who was unaware of Newton's mechanics?

The problem is the same here. Many criticisms addressed to us by uninformed minds are aimed at Descartes or Kant rather than existentialism. It is very often philosophy in general that is being questioned by attacking us. In truth, several years of study are needed to be able to detect existentialism's original contribution to philosophy and to be in a position to discuss the validity of it.

However, the fact that nonspecialists, regardless of their incompetence, are interested in existentialism must have an explanation. Symbolic logic, for example, never incited such passionate disputes. The reason, in fact, is that although existentialism claims to rest upon the most serious theoretical bases, it also claims to be a practical and living attitude toward the problems posed by the world today. It is a philosophy yet does not want to stay enclosed in books and schools; it intends to revive the great tradition of ancient wisdom that also involved difficult physics and logic, yet proposed a concrete human attitude to all men. This is why it is not expressed solely in theoretical and abstract treatises but also strives to reach a larger public through novels and plays. This attempt disconcerts many people and makes them doubt that existentialism is truly a philosophy. But this is misunderstanding the truth of philosophy, which, particularly in France, has never appeared as a singular discipline but as a global vision of the world and of man that must embrace the totality of the human domain. Today, the ideologies that gain the approval of most French intellectuals, namely Christianity, existentialism, and Marxism, all have a common pretension of showing man in entirety. They all respond to the same need: in France and all across Europe the individual is seeking with anguish to find his place in a world turned upside down.

Pascal summarized the ambiguity of the relationship between the Universe and man in a famous and striking expression when he called man a thinking reed. From this definition, Christianity retains essentially the aspect of interiority: in the secret of his heart, by the purity of his intentions, and by the individual accomplishment of

the ethics dictated by his conscience, man will attain his salvation in this world. On the contrary, Marxism emphasizes that man is a reed, a thing among things, definable by his relationship with the objective reality of the world.

Existentialism strives to hold both ends of the chain at the same time, surpassing the interior-exterior, subjective-objective opposition. It postulates the value of the individual as the source and reason for being of all significations and all colors, yet it admits that the individual has reality only through his engagement in the world. It affirms that the will of free being is sufficient for the accomplishment of freedom, yet it also states that this will can posit itself only by struggling against the obstacles and the oppressions that limit the concrete possibilities of man. It resembles individualism in the sense that it seems important to it that each individual gains his own salvation, and that each individual appears as being the only one able to obtain it for himself. Yet it also resembles Marxist realism because only in working actively for the concrete triumph of universal freedom, by proposing ends for himself that surpass him, can the individual hope to save himself. Thereby existentialism also seeks a reconciliation of those two reigns whose divorce is so nefarious to men in our time: the ethical reign and the political reign. Ethics appears to existentialism not as the formal respect of eternal and supraterrrestrial laws, but as the search for a valid foundation of human history, such as it unfolds on our earth. Politics is not, for existentialism, the simple adjustment of the efficient means toward an unconditioned end, but the perpetual and incessant creation and construction of the end by the means used to produce it. In other words, the task of man is one: to fashion the world by giving it a meaning. This meaning is not given ahead of time, just as the existence of each man is not justified ahead of time either.

Along with the idea of a God guaranteeing Good and Evil, existentialism rejects the notion of ready-made values whose affirmation precedes human judgment. By freely taking his own freedom as an end within himself and in his acts, man constitutes a kingdom of ends. Cut off from human will, the reality of the world is but an "absurd given." This is a conception that appears to many

people as hopeless and makes them accuse existentialism of being pessimistic. But actually there is no hopelessness, since we think that it is possible for man to snatch the world from the darkness of absurdity, clothe it in significations, and project valid goals into it. We very simply rediscover the wisdom of old Montaigne, who said, "Life is in itself neither good nor evil; it is the place of good or evil as you make them!" The fact is that the old labels, idealism-realism, individualism-universalism, pessimism-optimism, cannot be applied to a doctrine that is precisely an effort to surpass these oppositions in a new synthesis, respecting the fundamental ambiguity of the world, of man, and of their relationship. Such a novelty, I repeat, can hardly be summarized; it reveals itself only by a direct intuition that must be sought in the works where it is presented, and that bears fruit only if one takes the time to let it ripen within oneself.

Boredom

Martin Heidegger, The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics

We are sitting, for example, in the tasteless station of some lonely minor railway. It is four hours until the next train arrives. The district is uninspiring. We do have a book in our rucksack, though shall we read? No. Or think through a problem, some question? We are unable to. We read the timetables or study the table giving the various distances from this station to other places we are not otherwise acquainted with at all. We look at the clock—only a quarter of an hour has gone by. Then we go out onto the local road. We walk up and down, just to have something to do. But it is no use. Then we count the trees along the road, look at our watch again exactly five minutes since we last looked at it. Fed up with walking back and forth, we sit down on a stone, draw all kinds of figures in the sand, and in so doing catch ourselves looking at our watch yet again—half an hour—and so on.

An everyday situation with well-known, banal, yet quite spontaneous forms of passing the time. What are we really passing here? This question is strangely ambivalent. As the phrase says, we pass the time. Yet what does it mean here to pass the time? We cannot, after all, shake time off. To pass here means to make it pass by, to propel it, drive it on so that it passes. Our passing the time, however, in itself really a passing of boredom, where passing now means: driving away, shaking off. Passing the time is a driving away of boredom that drives time on.

What are we trying to chase away here in wanting to kill time—i.e., what is time? In passing the time we do not chase time away. Not only because this is ultimately altogether impossible, but because the whole attitude of passing the time as we shall see later—is not really directed toward time, even though in doing so we constantly look

at the clock. What do we really want in constantly looking at the clock? We merely want to see time passed. What time? The time until the train arrives. We constantly look at the clock because we are waiting for that point in time. We are fed up waiting, we want to have done with this waiting. We shake off boredom. Is the boredom that springs from this looking at the clock some kind of waiting, then? By no means. Being bored with something, after all, is not a waiting for something. In our example the most we can say is that it is waiting itself that is boring and that bores us, but boredom is not itself a waiting. Furthermore, not every waiting is necessarily boring. On the contrary, waiting can be full of suspense. In which case there is then no room for boredom at all. We thought we were already on the trail of boredom with the phenomenon of passing the time, yet once again it has disappeared.



To what extent, however, is the waiting in our example boring? What constitutes its boringness? Perhaps it is because it is a having to wait, i.e., because we are forced, coerced into a particular situation. This is why we become impatient. Thus what really oppresses us is more this impatience. We want to escape from our impatience. Is boredom then this impatience? Is boredom therefore not some waiting, but this being impatient, not wanting or being able to wait, and for this reason being ill-humoured? Yet is boredom really an attunement of ill humour or even an impatience? Certainly impatience can arise in connection with boredom. Nevertheless, it is neither identical with boredom, nor even a property of it. There is neither a patient nor an impatient boredom. The impatience rather has to do with the manner and way in which we want to get boredom under control and are often unable to get it under control. Our passing the time has this peculiar character of

a fluttering unease that brings this impatience with it. For what happens in becoming bored is that our unease while having to wait does not allow us to find anything that could grip us, satisfy us or let us be patient. Being bored is neither a waiting nor a being impatient. This having to wait and our impatience may be present and surround boredom, but they never constitute boredom itself.

Before we continue with our interpretation of boredom, we shall recall once more the steps we have taken hitherto. We carried out a provisional examination of boredom from various angles. These considerations led us to see that an interpretation of boredom is evidently necessary; for boredom is indeed known to us, yet we do not really know it intimately. Indeed, when we look more closely we find the essence of this attunement quite ungraspable: it disappears. We saw that when we attempt such an



interpretation of boredom it is initially not at all clear where we should begin, in what direction we should inquire and guide the interpretation, or how we are to make this known phenomenon thematic. A general methodological maxim could indeed provide the guideline that all investigation must see to it that each object is brought under the best conditions of observability. We soon saw, however, that this apparently quite universal and self-evident maxim is something that science merely applies, something that goes back to a fundamental relation between being and truth. This universal directive therefore has nothing to tell us so long as it remains unclear in what way whatever we are investigating — namely this attunement — is, and what kind of truth belongs to it; whether this relation, and the way in which the attunement is, are in each case such that they can be made the object of scientific observation. We then also saw that this maxim not only tells us nothing, but fundamentally leads us astray, that whenever we follow it, it misleads us into bringing such a lived experience, called boredom, before us as an observable object, with

apparently legitimate, yet fundamentally exaggerated and mistaken precision. It is rather a matter of seeing boredom, as it bores us, and of grasping it as it occupies us. It always shows itself in such a way that we immediately turn against it. Whenever we make boredom an object—if we may say such a thing—we must from the outset let it emerge as something that we turn against, not in an arbitrary manner, but—to put it crudely—in this peculiar reaction that is provoked of its own accord by the emergent boredom, and which we call passing the time. We must approach this peculiar unity of a boredom and a passing the time in which a confrontation with boredom somehow occurs.

Finally, we saw that we have thereby extended our field of appraisal beyond an isolated lived experience to its unity with passing the time. We saw, however—that this will emerge more clearly at a later stage—that although we are also making present to ourselves an example of passing the time, it is immediately closer to us than this and that we constantly reside within it. What is at issue, then, is precisely transposing ourselves back into this immediacy of everyday comportment, away from all the theories and methodological efforts that seem necessary. Our investigation must nonetheless show that this does not mean we can proceed in an arbitrary manner. In passing the time we rescue ourselves from boredom. To show this we provided a simple depiction of one particular boring situation. We are beginning with the phenomenon of passing the time and asking initially what is really being passed here. It is not time that is being passed, although in a way it does make sense to say so, as we shall see. Boredom is passed off or driven off by our driving time on in a certain sense. When we say that passing the time is a driving away of boredom that drives time on, this seems to be a very precise definition of passing the time. Yet upon closer investigation we see that this definition is incorrect. For in this driving time on and driving boredom away something has already been said about boredom, namely this moment of driving time on, driving it by. We can then no longer say that in doing so we are driving boredom away. In other words, when we take the definition in this formal way, we may no longer speak of boredom itself. This is mentioned only as an aside, so that you do not become set on this definition. More important is the concrete question: What does all

this mean? Toward the end I pointed to what oppresses us in this boring situation. It is the peculiar waiting that we want to have done with, so that the suggestion is that perhaps boredom is this waiting. Finally, we saw that waiting and boredom are not identical. Rather waiting itself can have the character of boringness, yet need not do so.



Yet what does it mean here to pass the time?



3. Anxiety

Søren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety

Anxiety may be compared with dizziness. He whose eye happens to look down into the yawning abyss becomes dizzy. But what is the reason for this? It is just as much in his own eye as in the abyss, for suppose he had not looked down.

Hence anxiety is the dizziness of freedom, which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself. Freedom succumbs in this dizziness. Further than this, psychology cannot and will not go. In that very moment everything is changed, and freedom, when it again rises, sees that it is guilty. Between these two moments lies the leap, which no science has explained and which no science can explain. He who becomes guilty in anxiety becomes as ambiguously guilty as it is possible to become.

Anxiety is a feminine weakness in which freedom faints. Psychologically speaking, the fall into sin always takes place in weakness. But anxiety is of all things the most selfish, and no concrete expression of freedom is as selfish as the possibility of every concretion. This again is the overwhelming factor that determines the individual's ambiguous relation, sympathetic and antipathetic. In anxiety there is the selfish infinity of possibility, which does not tempt like a choice but ensnaringly disquiets with its sweet anxiousness.

In each subsequent individual, anxiety is more reflective. This may be expressed by saying that the nothing that is the object of anxiety becomes, as it were, more and more a something. We do not say that it actually becomes a something or actually signifies something; we do not say that instead of a nothing we shall now substitute sin or something else, for what holds true of the innocence of the subsequent individual also holds true of Adam. All of this is only for freedom, and it is only

as the single individual himself posits sin by the qualitative leap. Here the nothing of anxiety is a complex of presentiments, which, reflecting themselves in themselves, come nearer and nearer to the individual, even though again, when viewed essentially in anxiety, they signify a nothing- yet, mark well, not a nothing with which the individual has nothing to do, but a nothing that communicates vigorously with the ignorance of innocence. This reflectiveness is a predisposition that, before the individual becomes guilty, signifies essentially nothing; whereas when by the qualitative leap he becomes guilty, it is the presupposition by which he goes beyond himself, because sin presupposes itself, obviously not before it is posited (which is predestination), but in that it is posited.



Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness

Kierkegaard describing anguish before sin characterizes it as anguish in the face of freedom. But Heidegger, who is known to have been greatly influenced by Kierkegaard, considers anguish instead as the apprehension of nothingness. These two descriptions of anguish do not appear to us contradictory; on the contrary the one implies the other.

First we must acknowledge that Kierkegaard is right; anguish is distinguished from fear in that fear is fear of beings-in-the-world whereas anguish is anguish before myself. Vertigo is anguish to the extent that I am not of falling over the precipice, but of throwing myself over. A situation provokes fear if there is a possibility of my life being changed from without; my being provokes anguish to the extent that I distrust myself and my own reactions in that situation. The artillery



Anxiety is the dizziness of freedom.

preparation which precedes the attack can provoke fear in the soldier who undergoes the bombardment, but his anguish begins when he tries to foresee the conduct with which he will face the bombardment, when he asks himself if he is going to be able to "hold out." Similarly the recruit who reports for active duty at the beginning of the war can in some instances be afraid of death, but more often he is "afraid of being afraid"; that is, he is filled with anguish before himself. Most of the time dangerous or threatening situations present themselves in different perspectives; they will be apprehended through a feeling of fear or of anguish according to whether we envisage the situation as acting on the man or the man as acting on the situation. The man who has just received a hard blow - for example, losing a great part of his wealth in a crash - can have the fear of threatening poverty. He will experience anguish a moment later when nervously wringing his hands (a symbolic reaction to the action which has occurred but which remains still wholly indeterminate), he exclaims to himself: "What am I going to do? But what am I going to do?" In this sense fear and anguish are mutually exclusive since fear is unreflective apprehension of the transcendent and anguish is reflective apprehension of the self; the one emerges from the destruction of the other. The normal process in the case which I have just cited is a constant transition from the one to the other. But there also exist situations where anguish appears pure; that is, without being preceded or followed by fear. If, for example, I have been raised to a new status and entrusted with a delicate and flattering mission, I can feel anguish at the thought that I will not be capable [i.e., morally capable] perhaps of fulfilling it, and yet I will not have the least fear in the world of the consequences of my possible failure.

What is the meaning of anguish in the various examples which I have just given? Let us take up again the example of vertigo. Vertigo announces itself through fear; I am on a narrow path -- without a guardrail -- which goes along a precipice. The precipice presents itself to me as to be avoided; it represents a danger of death. At the same time I conceive of a certain number of causes, originating in universal determinism, which can transform that threat of death into reality; I can slip on a stone and fall into the abyss; the crumbling earth of the path can give way under my steps. Through these various anticipations, I am given to myself as a thing; I am passive in relation to these

possibilities; they come to me from without; insofar as I am also an object in the world, subject to gravitation, they are my possibilities. At this moment fear appears, which in terms of the situation is the apprehension of myself as a destructible transcendent in the midst of transcentents, as an object which does not contain in itself the origin of its future disappearance. My reaction will be of the reflective order; I will pay attention to the stones in the road; I will keep myself as far as possible from the edge of the path. I realize myself as repudiating the threatening situation with all my strength, and I project before myself a certain number of future actions destined to keep the threats of the world at a distance from me. These actions are my possibilities. I escape fear by the very fact that I am placing myself on a plane where my own possibilities are substituted for the transcendent probabilities where human action had no place.

Burnout

Byung Chul-Han, The Burnout Society

Today's society is no longer Foucault's disciplinary world of hospitals, madhouses, prisons, barracks, and factories. It has long been replaced by another regime, namely a society of fitness studios, office towers, banks, airports, shopping malls, and genetic laboratories. Twenty-first-century society is no longer a disciplinary society, but rather an achievement society [Leistungsgesellschaft]. Also, its inhabitants are no longer "obedience-subjects" but "achievement-subjects." They are entrepreneurs of themselves. The walls of disciplinary institutions, which separate the normal from the abnormal, have come to seem archaic. Foucault's analysis of power cannot account for the psychic and topological changes that occurred as disciplinary society transformed into achievement society. Nor does the commonly employed concept of "control society" do justice to this change. It still contains too much negativity.

Disciplinary society is a society of negativity. It is defined by the negativity of prohibition. The negative modal verb that governs it is May Not. By the same token, the negativity of compulsion adheres to Should. Achievement society, more and more, is in the process of discarding negativity. Increasing deregulation is abolishing it. Unlimited Can is the positive modal verb of achievement society. Its plural form the affirmation, "Yes, we can"- epitomizes achievement society's positive orientation. Prohibitions, commandments, and the law are replaced by projects, initiatives, and motivation. Disciplinary society is still governed by no. Its negativity produces madmen and criminals. In contrast, achievement society creates depressives and losers.

On one level, continuity holds in the paradigm shift from dis-

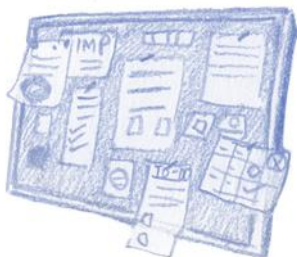


They are entrepreneurs of themselves.

disciplinary society to achievement society. Clearly, the drive to maximize production inhabits the social unconscious. Beyond a certain point of productivity, disciplinary technology—or, alternately, the negative scheme of prohibition—hits a limit. To heighten productivity, the paradigm of disciplination is replaced by the paradigm of achievement, or, in other words, by the positive scheme of Can; after a certain level of productivity obtains, the negativity of prohibition impedes further expansion. The positivity of Can is much more efficient than the negativity of Should. Therefore, the social unconscious switches from Should to Can. The achievement-subject is faster and more productive than the obedience-subject. However, the Can does not revoke the Should. The obedience-subject remains disciplined. It has now completed the disciplinary stage. Can increases the level of productivity, which is the aim of disciplinary technology, that is, the imperative of Should. Where increasing productivity is concerned, no break exists between Should and Can; continuity prevails.

Alain Ehrenberg locates depression in the transition from disciplinary society to achievement society:

Depression began its ascent when the disciplinary model for behaviors, the rules of authority and observance of taboos that gave social classes as well as both sexes a specific destiny, broke against norms that invited us to undertake personal initiative by enjoining us to be ourselves.... The depressed individual is unable to measure up; he is tired of having to become himself.



Problematically, however, Ehrenberg considers depression only from the perspective of the economy of the self: the social imperative only to belong to oneself makes one depressive. For Ehrenberg, depression is the pathological expression of the late-modern human being's

failure to become himself. Yet depression also follows from impoverished attachment [Bindungsarmut], which is a characteristic of the increasing fragmentation and atomization of life in society. Ehrenberg lends no attention to this aspect of depression. He also overlooks the systemic violence inhabiting achievement society, which provokes psychic infarctions. It is not the imperative only to belong to oneself, but the pressure to achieve that causes exhaustive depression. Seen in this light, burnout syndrome does not express the exhausted self so much as the exhausted, burnt-out soul. According to Ehrenberg, depression spreads when the commandments and prohibitions of disciplinary society yield to self-responsibility and initiative. In reality, it is not the excess of responsibility and initiative that makes one sick, but the imperative to achieve: the new commandment of late-modern labor society.

Ehrenberg wrongly equates the human type of the present day with Nietzsche's "sovereign man":

Nietzsche's sovereign man, his own man, was becoming a mass phenomenon: there was nothing above him that could tell him who he ought to be because he was the sole owner of himself.

In fact, Nietzsche would say that that human type in the process of becoming reality en masse is no sovereign superman but "the last man," who does nothing but work. The new human type, standing exposed to excessive positivity without any defense, lacks all sovereignty. The depressive human being is an animal laborans that exploits itself and it does so voluntarily, without external constraints. It is predator and prey at once. The self, in the strong sense of the word, still represents an immunological category. However, depression eludes all immunological schemes. It erupts at the moment when the achievement-subject is no longer able to be able [nicht mehr können kann]. First and foremost, depression is creative fatigue and exhausted ability [Schaffens- und Könnensmüdigkeit].

The complaint of the depressive individual, "Nothing is possible," can only occur in a society that thinks, "Nothing is impossible." No-longer-being-able-to-be-able leads to destructive self-reproach and auto-aggression. The achievement-subject finds itself fighting with

itself. The depressive has been wounded by internalized war.

Depression is the sickness of a society that suffers from excessive positivity. It reflects a humanity waging war on itself. The achievement-subject stands free from any external instance of domination [Herrschaftsinstanz] forcing it to work, much less exploiting it. It is lord and master of itself. Thus, it is subject to no one or, as the case may be, only to itself. It differs from the obedience-subject on this score. However, the disappearance of domination does not entail freedom. Instead, it makes freedom and constraint coincide. Thus, the achievement-subject gives itself over to compulsive freedom—that is, to the free constraint of maximizing achievement. Excess work and performance escalate into auto-exploitation. This is more efficient than allo-exploitation, for the feeling of freedom attends it. The exploiter is simultaneously the exploited. Perpetrator and victim can no longer be distinguished. Such self-referentiality produces a paradoxical freedom that abruptly switches over into violence because of the compulsive structures dwelling within it. The psychic indispositions of achievement society are pathological manifestations of such a paradoxical freedom.



Nausea

Jean-Paul Sartre, Nausea

All at once the veil is torn away, I have understood, I have seen.... The roots of the chestnut tree sank into the ground just beneath my bench. I couldn't remember it was a root anymore. Words had vanished and with them the meaning of things, the ways things are to be used, the feeble points of reference which men have traced on their surface. I was sitting, stooping over, head bowed, alone in front of this black, knotty lump, entirely raw, frightening me. Then I had this vision.

It took my breath away. Never, up until these last few days, had I suspected the meaning of "existence." I was like the others, like the ones walking along the seashore, wearing their spring clothes. I said, like them, "The sea is green; that white speck up there is a seagull," but I didn't feel that it existed or that the seagull was an "existing seagull"; usually existence conceals itself. It is there, around us, in us, it is us, you can't say two words without mentioning it, but you can never touch it. When I believed I was thinking about it, I was thinking nothing, my head was empty, or there was just one word in my head, the word "being." Or else I was thinking — how can I put it? I was thinking of properties. I was telling myself that the sea belonged to the class of green objects, or that green was one of the qualities of the sea. Even when I looked at things, I was miles from dreaming that they existed: they looked like scenery to me. I picked them up in my hands, they served me as tools, I foresaw their resistance. But that all happened on the surface. If anyone had asked me what existence was, I would have answered in good faith, that it was nothing, simply an



And then all at once, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself.

empty form added to things from the outside, without changing any thing in their nature. And then all at once, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost harmless look of an abstract category: it was the dough out of which things were made, this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the patches of grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous lumps, in disorder — naked, with a frightful and obscene nakedness.

I kept myself from making the slightest movement, but I didn't need to move in order to see, behind the trees, the blue columns and the lampposts of the bandstand and the Velleda, in the middle of a clump of laurel. All these objects — how can I put it? They made me uncomfortable. I would have liked them to exist less forcefully, more dryly, more abstractly, with more reserve. The chestnut tree pressed itself against my eyes. Green blight covered it halfway up; the bark, black and swollen, looked like boiled leather. The sound of the water in the Masqueret Fountain trickled in my ears, made a nest there, filled them with sighs; my nostrils overflowed with a green, putrid odor. All things, gently, tenderly, were letting themselves exist like weary women giving way to laughter, saying, "It's good to laugh," in a damp voice; they were sprawling in front of each other, abjectly confessing their existence. I realized there was no mean between non-existence and this swooning abundance. If you existed, you had to exist to excess, to the point of moldiness, bloatedness, obscenity. In another world, circles, musical themes keep their pure and rigid lines. But existence is a yielding. Trees, pillars blue as night, the happy gurgling of a fountain, living smells, little mists of heat floating in the cold air, a red haired man digesting on a bench: all these somnolences, all these digestings taken together, had their vaguely



funny side. Funny — no: not quite that, nothing that exists can be funny; it was like a floating, almost entirely elusive analogy, to certain situations in vaudeville. We were a heap of existences, uncomfortable, embarrassed at ourselves, we hadn't the slightest reason to be there. none of us, each one confused, vaguely alarmed, felt superfluous in relation to the others. Superfluous: it was the only relationship I could establish between these trees, these gates, these stones. In vain I tried to count the chestnut trees, to locate them by their relationship to the Velleda, to compare their height with the height of the plane trees: each of them eluded the relations in which I tried to enclose it isolated itself, and overflowed. Of these relations (which I obstinately maintained in order to delay the collapse of the human world, of measurements, quantities, directions) I felt their arbitrariness; these relations no longer bit into things. Superfluous, the chestnut tree there, in front of me, a little to the left. Superfluous, the Velleda.

And I myself — soft, weak, obscene, digesting, juggling with dismal thoughts — I, too, was superfluous. Fortunately, I didn't feel it, rather it was a matter of understanding it; but I was uncomfortable because I was afraid of feeling it (even now I'm afraid — afraid that it might catch me behind my head and lift me up like a wave from the depths). I dreamed vaguely of killing myself to wipe out at least one of these superfluous existences. But even my death would have been superfluous. Superfluous, my corpse, my blood on these stones, between these plants, at the bottom of this smiling garden. And the gnawed flesh would have been superfluous in the earth which would receive my bones, at last, cleaned, peeled, as clean as teeth, it would have been superfluous: I was superfluous for eternity.

The word Absurdity is emerging under my pen; a little while ago, in the garden, I couldn't find it, but neither was I looking for it, I didn't need it: I thought without words, on things, with things. Absurdity was not an idea in my head, or the breath of a voice, only this long serpent dead at my feet, this serpent of wood. Serpent or claw or root or vulture's talon, what difference does it make? And without formulating anything clearly, I understood that I had found the clue to existence, the clue to my nauseas, to my own life. In fact, all I could grasp beyond that comes down to this fundamental absurdity. Absurdity: another word. I struggle against words; beneath me there

I touched the thing. But I wanted to fix the absolute character of this absurdity. A movement, an event in the tiny colored world of men is only relatively absurd — in relation to the accompanying circumstances. A madman's ravings, for example, are absurd in relation to the situation in which he is, but not in relation to his own delirium.



But a little while ago I made an experiment with the absolute or the absurd. This root — there was nothing in relation to which it was absurd. How can I pin it down with words? Absurd: in relation to the stones, the tufts of yellow grass, the dry mud, the tree, the sky, the green benches. Absurd, irreducible; nothing — not even a profound, secret delirium of nature could explain it. Obviously I did not know everything, I had not seen the seeds sprout, or the tree grow. But faced with this great wrinkled paw, neither ignorance nor knowledge was important: the world of explanations and reasons is not the world of existence. A circle is not absurd, it is clearly explained by the rotation of the segment of a straight line around one of its extremities. But neither does a circle exist. This root, in contrast, existed in such a way that I could not explain it. Knotty, inert, nameless, it fascinated me, filled my eyes, brought me back unceasingly to its own existence. In vain I repeated, “This is a root” — it didn’t take hold any more. I saw clearly that you could not pass from its function as a root, as a suction pump, to that, to that hard and thick skin of a sea lion, to this oily, callous; stubborn look. The function explained nothing: it allowed you to understand in general what a root was, but not at all that one there. That root with its color, shape, its congealed movement, was beneath all explanation. Each of its qualities escaped it a little, flowed out of it, half solidified, almost became a thing; each one was superfluous in the root and the whole stump now gave me the impression of uncoiling out of itself a little, denying itself, losing itself in a frenzied excess. I scraped my heel against this black claw: I wanted to peel off some of

the bark. For no reason at all, out of defiance, to make the bare pink of a scratch appear absurd on the tanned leather: to play with the absurdity of the world. But, when I drew my heel back, I saw that the bark was still black. Black? I felt the word deflating, emptying of meaning with extraordinary rapidity.

Black? The root was not black, there was no black on this piece of wood — there was something else black, like the circle, did not exist. I looked at the root: was it more than black or almost black? But I soon stopped questioning myself because I had the feeling of knowing what the score was. Yes, I had already scrutinized innumerable objects, with deep uneasiness. I had already tried — in vain — to think something about them: and I had already felt their cold, inert qualities elude me, slip through my fingers....Weird: that's what they were, the sounds, the smells, the tastes. When they ran quickly under your nose like startled hares and you didn't pay too much attention, you might believe them to be simple and reassuring, you might believe that there was real blue in the world, real red, a real perfume of almonds or violets. But as soon as you held on to them for an instant, this feeling of comfort and security gave way to a deep uneasiness: colors, tastes, and smells were never real, never themselves and nothing but themselves. The simplest, most unanalyzable quality had too much content for itself, was superfluous at heart. That black against my foot, it didn't look like black, but rather the confused effort to imagine black by someone who had never seen black, and who wouldn't know where to stop, who would have imagined an ambiguous being beyond colors. It looked like a color, but also — like a bruise or a secretion, like an oozing — and like something else, a smell, for example, it melted into the smell of damp earth, warm moist wood, into a black smell that spread like varnish over this nervous wood, in a flavor of chewed, sweet fiber. I did not simply see this black: sight is an abstract invention, an idea that has been cleaned up, simplified, one of man's ideas. That black there, amorphous, weakly presence, overflowed sight, smell, and taste. But this exuberance became confusion and finally it was no longer anything because it was too much.

This moment was extraordinary. I was there, motionless, paralyzed, plunged in a horrible ecstasy. But at the heart of this ecstasy, something new had just appeared; I understood the nausea, I pos-

sessed it. To tell the truth, I did not formulate my discoveries to myself. But I think it would be easy for me to put them in words now. The essential point is contingency. I mean that by definition existence is not [logical] necessity. To exist is simply ... to be there; existences appear, let themselves be encountered, but you can never deduce them. Some people, I think, have understood this. Only they tried to overcome this contingency by inventing a being that was necessary and self-caused. But no necessary being can explain existence: contingency is not a delusion, an appearance which can be dissipated; it is the absolute, and, therefore, perfectly gratuitous. Everything is gratuitous, this park, this city, and myself. When you realize this, your heart turns over and everything begins to float....

How long will this fascination last? I was the root of the chestnut tree. Or rather I was entirely conscious of its existence. Still detached from it — since I was conscious of it — yet lost in it, nothing but it. A consciousness which was uneasy but nevertheless let itself fall with all its overhanging weight on this piece of inert wood. Time had stopped: a small black pool at my feet; it was impossible for something to come after this moment. I would have liked to tear myself away from that atrocious joy, but I did not even imagine it would be possible. I was inside; the black stump did not move, it stayed there, in my eyes, as a lump of food sticks in the windpipe. I could neither accept nor refuse it. What effort it took to raise my eyes! Did I raise them? Rather did I not obliterate myself for a moment in order to be reborn in the following moment with my head thrown back and my eyes raised upward? In fact, I was not even conscious of the transition. But suddenly it became impossible for me to think of the existence of the root. It was wiped out, I could repeat in vain, it exists, it is still there, under the bench, against my right foot. It no longer meant anything. Existence is not something which lets itself be thought of from a distance; it must invade you suddenly, master you, weigh heavily on your heart like a great motionless beast. — Or else there is nothing more at all.

There was nothing more, my eyes were empty and I was spell-bound by my deliverance. Then suddenly it began to move before my eyes in light, uncertain motions; the wind was shaking the top of the tree.

It did not displease me to see something move; it was a change from these motionless existences who watched me like staring eyes. I told myself, as I followed the swinging of the branches: movements never quite exist, they are processes, transitions between two existences, moments of weakness. I expected to see them come out of nothingness, ripen by stages, blossom; at last I was going to surprise existences in the process of being born.

No more than three seconds and all my hopes were swept away. Viewing these hesitant branches groping around like blind men, I could not succeed in grasping the process of coming into existence. This idea of process was a human invention. An idea too clear. All these trifling agitations, each of them, asserted themselves. They overflowed the leaves and branches everywhere. They whirled around these dry hands, enveloped them with tiny whirlwinds. Of course a movement was something different from a tree. But it was still an absolute. A thing. My eyes only encountered fullness. The tips of the branches were seething with existences which unremittingly renewed themselves and which were never born. The wind existing had just lighted on the tree like a huge fly, and the tree was shuddering. But the shudder was not an emerging quality, a process from potentiality to actuality; it was a thing; a shudder-thing flowed into the tree, took possession of it, shook it, and suddenly abandoned it, going further on to twist about itself. All was fullness and all was active, there was no weak moment in time; all, even the most imperceptible stirring, was mode of existence....

Had I dreamed this enormous presence? It was there, deposited on the garden, tumbling down in the trees, all soft, sticky, soiling everything, all thick, a jelly. And I, was I inside, with the garden? I was frightened, furious, I thought it was so stupid, so out of place. I hated this ignoble messiness. Piling up to the sky, spilling over, filling everything with its gelatinous slither, and I could see depths upon depths of it reaching far beyond the limits of the garden, the houses, and Bouville, as far as the eye could reach. I was no longer in Bouville; I was nowhere, I was floating. I was not surprised, I knew it was the World, the naked World revealing itself all at once, and I choked with rage at this gross absurd being. You couldn't even ask where all this came from, or how it was that a world existed, rather than nothingness. It didn't

have any meaning, the world was present everywhere, before, behind. There had been nothing before it. Nothing. There had never been a moment in which it could not have existed. That was what bothered me; of course there was no reason for its existing, this flowing larva. But it was not possible for it not to exist. It was unthinkable: to imagine nothingness you had to be there already, in the midst of the World, eyes wide open and alive; nothingness was only an idea in my head, an existing idea floating in this immensity; this nothingness had not come before existence, it was an existence like any other and appeared after many others. I shouted, What filth, what filth! And I shook myself to get rid of this sticky filth, but it held and there was so much, tons and tons of existence, endless. I suffocated at the bottom of this immense weariness. And then, all at once, the park emptied as through a great hole. The world disappeared as it had come, or else I woke up — anyway I saw no more of it; nothing was left but the yellow earth around me, out of which dead branches rose upward.

I got up and went out of the park. Once at the gate, I turned around. Then the garden smiled at me. I leaned against the gate and watched for a long time. The smile of the trees, of the clump of laurel, meant something: that was the real secret of existence. I remembered one Sunday, not more than three weeks ago. I had already detected everywhere a sort of conniving mood. Was it addressed to me? I felt with weariness that I had no way of understanding. No way. Yet it was there, waiting, a sort of look. It was there on the trunk of the chestnut tree — it was the chestnut tree. Things — one might have said thoughts — which halted halfway, which were forgotten, which forgot what they wanted to think and which stayed like that, hanging around with an odd little meaning which was beyond them. That little meaning annoyed me. I could not understand it, even if I had stayed leaning against the gate for a century. I had learned all I could know about existence.



Absurdity

Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus

The gods had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor. If one believes Homer, Sisyphus was the wisest and most prudent of mortals. According to another tradition, however, he was disposed to practice the profession of highwayman. I see no contradiction in this. Opinions differ as to the reasons why he became the futile laborer of the underworld. To begin with, he is accused of a certain levity in regard to the gods. He stole their secrets. Egina, the daughter of Esopus, was carried off by Jupiter. The father was shocked by that disappearance and complained to Sisyphus. He, who knew of the abduction, offered to tell about it on condition that Esopus would give water to the citadel of Corinth. To the celestial thunderbolts he preferred the benediction of water. He was punished for this in the underworld. Homer tells us also that Sisyphus had put Death in chains. Pluto could not endure the sight of his deserted, silent empire. He dispatched the god of war, who liberated Death from the hands of her conqueror. It is said that Sisyphus, being near to death, rashly wanted to test his wife's love. He ordered her to cast his unburied body into the middle of the public square. Sisyphus woke up in the underworld. And there, annoyed by an obedience so contrary to human love, he obtained from Pluto permission to return to earth in order to chastise his wife. But when he had seen again the face of this world, enjoyed water and sun, warm stones and the sea, he

no longer wanted to go back to the infernal darkness. Recalls, signs of anger, warnings were of no avail. Many years more he lived facing the curve of the gulf, the sparkling sea, and the smiles of earth. A decree of the gods was necessary. Mercury came and seized the impudent man by the collar and, snatching him from his joys, lead him forcibly back to the underworld, where his rock was ready for him.

You have already grasped that Sisyphus is the absurd hero. He is, as much through his passions as through his torture. His scorn of the gods, his hatred of death, and his passion for life won him that unspeakable penalty in which the whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing. This is the price that must be paid for the passions of this earth. Nothing is told us about Sisyphus in the underworld. Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them. As for this myth, one sees merely the whole effort of a body straining to raise the huge stone, to roll it, and push it up a slope a hundred times over; one sees the face screwed up, the cheek tight against the stone, the shoulder bracing the clay-covered mass, the foot wedging it, the fresh start with arms outstretched, the wholly human security of two earth-clotted hands. At the very end of his long effort measured by skyless space and time without depth, the purpose is achieved. Then Sisyphus watches the stone rush down in a few moments toward the lower world whence he will have to push it up again toward the summit. He goes back down to the plain.

It is during that return, that pause, that Sisyphus interests me. A face that toils so close to stones is already stone itself! I see that man going back down with a heavy yet measured step toward the torment of which he will never know the end. That hour like a breathing-space which returns as surely as his suffering, that is the hour of consciousness. At each of those moments when he leaves the heights and gradually sinks toward the lairs of the gods, he is superior to his fate. He is stronger than his rock.

If this myth is tragic, that is because its hero is conscious. Where would his torture be, indeed, if at every step the hope of succeeding upheld him? The workman of today works everyday in his life at the same tasks, and his fate is no less absurd. But it is tragic only at the rare moments when it becomes conscious. Sisyphus, proletariat of the gods, powerless and rebellious, knows the whole extent of his

wretched condition: it is what he thinks of during his descent. The lucidity that was to constitute his torture at the same time crowns his victory. There is no fate that can not be surmounted by scorn.

If the descent is thus sometimes performed in sorrow, it can also take place in joy. This word is not too much. Again I fancy Sisyphus returning toward his rock, and the sorrow was in the beginning. When the images of earth cling too tightly to memory, when the call of happiness becomes too insistent, it happens that melancholy arises in heavy to bear. These are our nights of Gethsemane. But crushing truths perish from being acknowledged. Thus, Edipus at the outset obeys fate without knowing it. But from the moment he knows, his tragedy begins. Yet at the same moment, blind and desperate, he realizes that his only bond linking him to the world is the cool hand of a girl. Then a tremendous remark rings out: "Despite so many ordeals, my advanced age and the nobility of my soul make me conclude that all is well." Sophocles' Edipus, like Dostoevsky's Kirilov, thus gives the recipe for the absurd victory. Ancient wisdom confirms modern heroism.

One does not discover the absurd without being tempted to write a manual of happiness. "What!---by such narrow ways--?" There is but one world, however. Happiness and the absurd are two sons of the same earth. They are inseparable. It would be a mistake to say that happiness necessarily springs from the absurd. It happens as well that the feeling of the absurd springs from happiness. "I conclude that all is well," says Edipus, and that remark is sacred. It echoes in the wild and limited universe of man. It teaches that all is not, has not been, exhausted. It drives out of this world a god who had come into it with dissatisfaction and a preference for futile suffering. It makes of fate a human matter, which must be settled among men.

All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is a thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. In the universe suddenly restored to its silence, the myriad wondering little voices of the earth rise up. Unconscious, secret calls, invitations from all the faces, they are the necessary reverse and price of victory. There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. If there is a person-

al fate, there is no higher destiny, or at least there is, but one which he concludes is inevitable and despicable. For the rest, he knows himself to be the master of his days. At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which become his fate, created by him, combined under his memory's eye and soon sealed by his death. Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see who knows that the night has no end, he is still on the go. The rock is still rolling.

I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! One always finds one's burdens again. But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile. Each atom of that stone, each mineral flake of that night filled mountain, in itself forms a world. The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy.



7. Happiness

Robin Wall Kimmerer, Braiding Sweetgrass

It came to me while picking beans, the secret of happiness.

I was hunting among the spiraling vines that envelop my teepees of pole beans, lifting the dark-green leaves to find handfuls of pods, long and green, firm and furred with tender fuzz. I snapped them off where they hung in slender twosomes, bit into one, and tasted nothing but August, distilled into pure, crisp beaniness. This summer abundance is destined for the freezer, to emerge again in deep midwinter when the air tastes only of snow. By the time I finished searching through just one trellis, my basket was full. To go and empty it in the kitchen, I stepped between heavy squash vines and around tomato plants fallen under the weight of their fruit. They sprawled at the feet of the sunflowers, whose heads bowed with the weight of maturing seeds. Lifting my basket over the row of potatoes, I noticed an open furrow revealing a nest of red skins where the girls left off harvesting that morning. I kicked some soil over them so the sun wouldn't green them up.

They complain about garden chores, as kids are supposed to do, but once they start they get caught up in the softness of the dirt and the smell of the day and it is hours later when they come back into the house. Seeds for this basket of beans were poked into the ground by their fingers back in May. Seeing them plant and harvest makes me feel like a good mother, teaching them how to provide for themselves. The seeds, though, we did not provide for ourselves.

When Skywoman buried her beloved daughter in the earth, the plants that are special gifts to the people sprang from her body. Tobacco grew from her head. From her hair, sweetgrass. Her heart gave us the strawberry. From her breasts grew corn, from her belly the squash, and we see in her hands the long-fingered clusters of beans. How do I show my girls I love them on a morning in June? I pick them wild strawberries. On a February afternoon we build snowmen and then sit by the fire. In March we make maple syrup. We pick violets in May and go swimming in July. On an August night we lay out blankets and watch meteor showers. In November, that great teacher the woodpile comes into our lives. That's just the beginning. How do we show our children our love? Each in our own way by a shower of gifts and a heavy rain of lessons. Maybe it was the smell of ripe tomatoes, or the oriole singing, or that certain slant of light on a yellow afternoon and the beans hanging thick around me. It just came to me in a wash of happiness that made me laugh out loud, startling the chickadees who were picking at the sunflowers, raining black and white hulls on the ground. I knew it with a certainty as warm and clear as the September sunshine. The land loves us back. She loves us with beans and tomatoes, with roasting ears and blackberries and birdsongs. By a shower of gifts and a heavy rain of lessons. She provides for us and teaches us to provide for ourselves. That's what good mothers do. I looked around at the garden and could feel her delight in giving us these beautiful raspberries, squash, basil, potatoes, asparagus, lettuce, kale and beets, broccoli, peppers, brussels sprouts, carrots, dill, onions, leeks, spinach. It reminded me of my little girls' answer to "How much do I love you?" "Thiiiiiiiiis much," with arms stretched wide, they replied. This is really why I made my daughters learn to garden—so they would always have a mother to love them, long after I am gone. The epiphany in the beans.

I spend a lot of time thinking about our relationships with land, how we are given so much and what we might give back. I try to work through the equations of reciprocity and responsibility, the whys and wherefores of building sustainable relationships with ecosystems. All in my head. But suddenly there was no intellectualizing, no rationalizing, just the pure sensation of baskets full of mother love. The ultimate reciprocity, loving and being loved



I knew it with a certainty as warm and clear as the September sunshine.



The land loves us back.

in return. Now, the plant scientist whosits at my desk and wears my clothes and sometimes borrows my car—she might cringe to hear me assert that a garden is a way that the land says, “I love you.” Isn’t it supposed to be just a matter of increasing net primary productivity of the artificially selected domesticated genotypes, manipulating environmental conditions through input of labor and materials to enhance yield? Adaptive cultural behaviors that produce a nutritious diet and increase individual fitness are selected for. What’s love got to do with it? If a garden thrives, it loves you? If a garden fails, do you attribute potato blight to a withdrawal of affection? Do unripe peppers signal a rift in the relationship? I have to explain things to her sometimes. Gardens are simultaneously a material and a spiritual undertaking. That’s hard for scientists, so fully brainwashed by Cartesian dualism, to grasp.

“Well, how would you know it’s love and not just good soil?” she asks. “Where’s the evidence? What are the key elements for detecting loving behavior?” That’s easy. No one would doubt that I love my children, and even a quantitative social psychologist would find no fault with my list of loving behaviors:

nurturing health and well-being,
protection from harm,
encouraging individual growth and development,
desire to be together,
generous sharing of resources,
working together for a common goal,
celebration of shared values,
interdependence,
sacrifice by one for the other, and
creation of beauty.



If we observed these behaviors between humans, we would say, “She loves that person.” You might also observe these actions between a person and a bit of carefully tended ground and say, “She loves that garden.” Why then, seeing this list, would you not make the leap to say that the garden loves her back?

The exchange between plants and people has shaped the evolutionary

history of both. Farms, orchards, and vineyards are stocked with species we have domesticated. Our appetite for their fruits leads us to till, prune, irrigate, fertilize, and weed on their behalf. Perhaps they have domesticated us. Wild plants have changed to stand in well-behaved rows and wild humans have changed to settle alongside the fields and care for the plants—a kind of mutual taming.

We are linked in a co-evolutionary circle. The sweeter the peach, the more frequently we disperse its seeds, nurture its young, and protect them from harm. Food plants and people act as selective forces on each other's evolution—the thriving of one in the best interest of the other. This, to me, sounds a bit like love. I sat once in a graduate writing workshop on relationships to the land. The students all demonstrated a deep respect and affection for nature. They said that nature was the place where they experienced the greatest sense of belonging and well-being. They professed without reservation that they loved the earth. And then I asked them, “Do you think that the earth loves you back?” No one was willing to answer that. It was as if I had brought a two-headed porcupine into the classroom. Unexpected. Prickly. They backed slowly away. Here was a room full of writers, passionately wallowing in unrequited love of nature. So I made it hypothetical and asked, “What do you suppose would happen if people believed this crazy notion that the earth loved them back?” The floodgates opened. They all wanted to talk at once. We were suddenly off the deep end, heading for world peace and perfect harmony. One student summed it up: “You wouldn't harm what gives you love.” Knowing that you love the earth changes you, activates you to defend and protect and celebrate. But when you feel that the earth loves you in return, that feeling transforms the relationship from a one-way street into a sacred bond. My daughter Linden grows one of my favorite gardens in the world. She brings up all kinds of good things to eat from her thin mountain soil, things I can only dream of, like tomatillos and chile. She makes compost and flowers, but the best part isn't the plants. It's that she phones me to chat while she weeds. We water and weed and harvest, visiting happily as we did when she was a girl despite the three thousand miles between us. Linden is immensely busy, and so I ask her why she gardens, given how much time it takes. She does it for the food and the satisfaction of hard work yielding something so

prolific, she says. And it makes her feel at home in a place, to have her hands in the earth. I ask her, “Do you love your garden?” even though I already know the answer. But then I ask, tentatively, “Do you feel that your garden loves you back?” She’s quiet for a minute; she’s never glib about such things. “I’m certain of it,” she says. “My garden takes care of me like my own mama.” I can die happy.

I once knew and loved a man who lived most of his life in the city, but when he was dragged off to the ocean or the woods he seemed to enjoy it well enough—as long as he could find an Internet connection. He had lived in a lot of places, so I asked him where he found his greatest sense of place. He didn’t understand the expression. I explained that I wanted to know where he felt most nurtured and supported. What is the place that you understand best? That you know best and knows you in return? He didn’t take long to answer. “My car,” he said. “In my car. It provides me with everything I need, in just the way I like it. My favorite music. Seat position fully adjustable. Automatic mirrors. Two cup holders. I’m safe. And it always takes me where I want to go.” Years later, he tried to kill himself. In his car. He never grew a relationship with the land, choosing instead the splendid isolation of technology. He was like one of those little withered seeds you find in the bottom of the seed packet, the one who never touched the earth.

I wonder if much that ails our society stems from the fact that we have allowed ourselves to be cut off from that love of, and from, the land. It is medicine for broken land and empty hearts. Larkin used to complain mightily about weeding. But now when she comes home, she asks if she can go dig potatoes. I see her on her knees, unearthing red skins and Yukon Golds and singing to herself. Larkin is in graduate school now, studying food systems and working with urban gardeners, growing vegetables for the food pantry on land reclaimed from empty lots. At-risk youth do the planting and hoeing and harvesting. The kids are surprised that the food they harvest is free. They’ve had to pay for everything they’ve ever gotten before. They greet fresh carrots, straight from the ground, with suspicion at first, until they eat one. She is passing on the gift, and the transformation is profound.

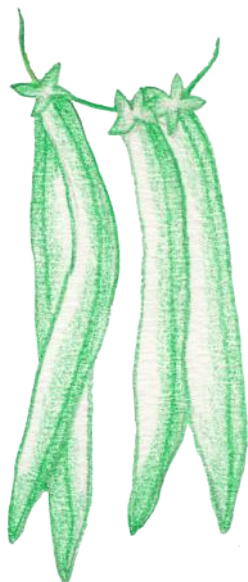
Of course, much of what fills our mouths is taken forcibly

from the earth. That form of taking does no honor to the farmer, to the plants, or to the disappearing soil. It's hard to recognize food that is mummified in plastic, bought and sold, as a gift anymore. Everybody knows you can't buy love. In a garden, food arises from partnership. If I don't pick rocks and pull weeds, I'm not fulfilling my end of the bargain. I can do these things with my handy opposable thumb and capacity to use tools, to shovel manure. But I can no more create a tomato or embroider a trellis in beans than I can turn lead into gold. That is the plants' responsibility and their gift: animating the inanimate. Now there is a gift.

People often ask me what one thing I would recommend to restore relationship between land and people. My answer is almost always, "Plant a garden." It's good for the health of the earth and it's good for the health of people. A garden is a nursery for nurturing connection, the soil for cultivation of practical reverence. And its power goes far beyond the garden gate—once you develop a relationship with a little patch of earth, it becomes a seed itself.

Something essential happens in a vegetable garden. It's a place where if you can't say "I love you" out loud, you can say it in seeds.

And the land will reciprocate, in beans.



Oceanic Feeling

Willa Cather, My Antonia

The earth was warm under me, and warm as I crumbled it through my fingers. Queer little red bugs came out and moved in slow squadrons around me. Their backs were polished vermilion, with black spots. I kept as still as I could. Nothing happened. I did not expect anything to happen. I was something that lay under the sun and felt it, like the pumpkins, and I did not want to be anything more. I was entirely happy. Perhaps we feel like that when we die and become a part of something entire, whether it is sun and air, or goodness and knowledge. At any rate, that is happiness; to be dissolved into something complete and great. When it comes to one, it comes as naturally as sleep.

Sigmund Freud, Civilization and its Discontents

The impression forces itself upon one that men measure by false standards, that everyone seeks power, success, riches for himself and admires others who attain them, while undervaluing the truly precious things in life. And yet, in making any general judgment of this kind, one is in danger of forgetting the manifold variety of humanity and its mental life. There are certain men from whom their contemporaries do not withhold veneration, although their greatness rests on attributes and achievements which are completely foreign to the aims and ideals of the multitude. One might well be inclined to suppose

that after all it is only a minority who appreciate these great men, while the majority cares nothing for them. But the discrepancy between mens opinions and their behaviour is so wide and their desires so many-sided that things are probably not so simple.

One of these exceptional men calls himself my friend in his letters to me. I had sent him my little book which treats of religion as an illusion and he answered that he agreed entirely with my views on religion, but that he was sorry I had not properly appreciated the ultimate source of religious sentiments. This consists in a peculiar feeling, which never leaves him personally, which he finds shared by many others, and which he may suppose millions more also experience. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of eternity, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded, something oceanic. It is, he says, a purely subjective experience, not an article of belief; it implies no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious spirit and is taken hold of by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into definite channels, and also no doubt, used up in them. One may rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even though one reject all beliefs and all illusions. These views, expressed by my friend whom I so greatly honour and who himself once in poetry described the magic of illusion, put me in a difficult position. I cannot discover this oceanic feeling in myself. It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings. One may attempt to describe their physiological signs. Where that is impossible I am afraid the oceanic feeling, too, will defy this kind of classification. Nothing remains but to turn to the ideational content which most readily associates itself with the feeling. If I have understood my friend aright, he means the same thing as that consolation offered by an original and somewhat unconventional writer to his hero, contemplating suicide: Out of this world we cannot fall. So it is a feeling of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole.



It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of eternity, a feeling as



of something limitless, unbounded, something oceanic.

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Thank you to everyone who has influenced this book, including and not limited to:

My illustration professors Tim O'Brien and Floyd Hughes,

My parents for being nice to me and my sibling for suggesting some of these texts,

My friends for putting up with me being annoying about philosophy,

And Kulfi the cat for giving me the idea for this thesis.

